

The "missional church": a model for Canadian churches?

By David Horrox

Canadian culture is becoming more secular and is characterized by a greater belief in relative rather than absolute truth, a decline in traditional beliefs, behaviours, families and communities. Canada's ceremony on Parliament Hill, after the events in New York on September 11, 2001, was telling. God's name was not uttered, and prayer, hymn singing or reading from scripture of any religion were absent. This stems presumably from the belief that, if such activities took place, someone, somehow, somewhere might be offended.

Although Canadian churches believe that it has the answer or humanity's problems in the message of Jesus Christ, its message is largely ignored. Faith is now a totally private matter. Allowing for Stockwell Day's shortcomings as a national leader, the ridicule to which he was subjected in the last federal election for his offence of holding Christian beliefs and, perish the thought, actually being influenced by them, clearly demonstrated the hostility towards religion, particularly the Christian religion, in our public square.

Faced with an increasingly secular outlook, Canadian churches have struggled to cope with changes that they do not fully understand. To some, Canadian churches have aped the surrounding culture, with ministers becoming marketing professionals shaping religious doctrines to the needs or perceived needs of Canadians. Church language, once distinct, has become laden with secular slogans. Programs proliferate to meet the perceived needs of church members, with Bible studies in some churches concentrating on such subjects as "How God can make you a winner." The prosperity gospel, in its crassest form, reflects our materialistic, consumer-driven society. The church seems more marginalized and irrelevant to more and more Canadians, and in sharp decline in its capacity to influence the trends in our society.

The question of the apostle Paul in Acts 21: 22, "What, then, is to be done?" is appropriate.

Becoming a missional church

The answer proposed by Darrel L. Guder of Princeton Theological Seminary, among others, is that the Christian church in Canada should return to its roots and become a "missional" church. That is, the church should strike out in a different direction; it should reject the cultural forms that carry questionable assumptions about what the church is, what its public role should be and what its voice should sound like and become a "sent" community. The church should stop mimicking the surrounding culture and become an alternative community, with a different set of beliefs, values and behaviours. Ministers would no longer engage in marketing; churches would no longer place primary emphasis on programs to serve members. The traditional ways of evaluating "successful churches"---bigger buildings, more people, bigger budgets, larger ministerial staff, new and more programs to serve members---would be rejected. New yardsticks would be the norm: To what extent is our church a "sent" community in which each believer is reaching out to his community? To what extent is our church impacting the community with a Christian message that challenges the values of our secular society?

What difference would it make?

The implications are significant when a church makes a conscious decision to become a missional church. The focus is no longer on building bigger facilities that require mortgages, are more costly to maintain, heat, light and insure. Darrel Guder goes so far as to say that such churches may wish to consider renting facilities or meet in homes instead of entering into a costly building program.

"Mission" would be looked at differently and no longer deemed to consist of sending money or missionaries to some overseas field. There would be increased emphasis on equipping Christians to move out into the community and confidently, not arrogantly, communicate the good news of the kingdom. The church would become more inclusive in the sense that those from unchurched backgrounds or of other religions and who are not sure of what Christ will mean for their lives will be invited to enter the journey at any point. More monies would be directed to penetrating the community with the message of Christ and those parts of the church most missional in their focus would receive a bigger share of the church's budget. In this regard, youth ministries and teenagers frequently tend to be the most mission-minded.

Less emphasis would be placed on providing programs for existing Christians. Spring Garden Church in Toronto, which set out to become a missional church several years ago, closed down a well attended Sunday evening service (800 in attendance on average) because the service had become merely a meeting place for single Christian young people looking to meet a member of the opposite sex, and served no missional purpose.

A new way to be 'church'

The task of equipping Christians to become effective missionaries to the community, in light of today's realities, will require work. To memorize the four spiritual laws is inadequate. To reach Generation Xers, for example, the first unchurched generation in Canadian society, requires a different approach. Such young people, largely reared on the premise that there is no absolute truth, and often coming from a background of broken or dysfunctional homes, will not react positively to aggressive and hurried evangelism. Generation Xers do, however, value honesty and friendship and, when convinced that a Christian is genuine, will be willing to listen to the message. In other words, it takes time because friendships need to be established first.

Walking together on a journey

The invitation should be an invitation to companionship, to join with a Christian community on a journey. In Guder's words, the church would witness that its members hunger for hope that there is a God who reigns in love and intends the good of the whole earth. The church community would testify that they have heard God's message that such a reign is coming and indeed is already breaking into the world. They would confirm that they have heard the open welcome and received it daily and they would invite others to join those who have also been extended God's welcome. The church would offer itself to assist their entrance into the reign of God and to travel as co-pilgrims.

Such an approach is especially appealing to young people since most of them are unchurched, denying the concept of absolute truth and slow to make commitments. They are, however, longing for community as the popular television show "Friends" attests. "Will the church offer such people an alternative community of Christian love?"

Longing to be connected to a caring community is not confined to young people. Loneliness at all ages is common in Canada, particularly in large cities and is especially found among the poor and marginalized of our society. Will the church, now itself becoming ignored and marginalized, move to minister to these people?

No church is totally missional, however and all churches have some aspects of the missional church. As church leaders contemplate the direction of their churches in light of the changes in Canadian society, it would worthwhile to ponder some of the questions raised by this church model:

Discuss

1. To what extent are we a missional church?
2. Should we consciously move towards becoming a missional church or, if not totally, becoming more of a missional church than we are now?
3. Do we really need a new church or an expansion of our present church facility or can we do things differently with existing accommodation?
4. How can we equip our members and adherents to become better 'missionaries' in our community?
5. Who are the marginalized in our community and how can we minister to them?

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